

061208 Media Availability re: Floods

[0:27] GOV: Today's travels took our Agricultural Commissioner, Andy Miller and I across the state east to west. In four locations we saw farmers and agricultural experts from probably ten or twelve different counties, so it's something of a cross-section of and very early of course to really know. I'll just give you some impressions and Andy can follow up, or you could follow up with him.

[0:57] GOV: I had hoped to find the damage to our agriculture sector might be limited or might be recoverable. That is not my impression. After today, it appears much more likely that the damage is severe and will not be salvageable in many cases for the towns of this year. We talked to farmers who have lost anywhere from ten to nearly all their crop. We talked to farmers who feel it is highly unlikely they will be able to re-plant. The last day for corn is only a week or more off, and the land will still be wet. We talked to farmers who had already re-planted once after the rains in the spring and have now lost two plantings. Livestock has its own very serious issues--already did with the cost of feed and other inputs. Many of them have seen these difficulties aggravated.

[1:57] GOV: We've picked up some very constructive ideas in areas, for instance, regulatory flexibility. A lot of, I thought, good suggestions about things that the state or the USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture) could do to recognize the difficult situations we're in: flexibility about re-building requirements, for instance, or perhaps some of the environmental requirements that we have—certainly around some of the federal deadlines and other requirements for seeking aid, crop insurance, and so forth. I plan to speak to Secretary Schafer, USDA, very early tomorrow morning and take up some of these items with him.

[2:44] GOV: Secondly, I want to say that we've asked FSSA (Family and Social Services Administration) Secretary Mitch Roob to head up the special effort that I mentioned the yesterday to make the process of getting all relevant assistance as easy and straightforward for Hoosiers as we possibly can. And each FSSA office in the affected counties will be opened to help people with their FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) applications. And of course, many folks are now and will be eligible for food stamps and other assistance. Then, in as many counties as possible, as fast as possible, Secretary Roob is overseeing the creation of one-stop shopping centers, so to speak, for a host of potential needs and services. There is a little check-list that you may have been given already, or will be, to answer that—a checklist that a person could look at and identify items ranging from rental assistance or housing support to public health, information to help with insurance and so forth, unemployment. Again, our goal is to do the best job possible, to do the best job I hope any state has ever done at helping people who have taken a real hit and are, understandably, shaken, to get all the relevant assistance as easily and swiftly as possible.

[4:25] GOV: The first three of those centers will be opened in Columbus, Martinsville, and Terre Haute at 9 a.m. tomorrow, and they'll be open on Saturday. Lastly I'll just say that I went back to Elnora today, the town the National Guard saved, and I saw some folks who are very, very grateful. Obviously people there suffered a lot of damage too, some of them, but not nearly what could have happened, and yet again I thank General Harris who, under General Lumbarger's command, has had the lead in all the many efforts that the Guard has delivered, and I thank the local responders there, but it's quite a story. Very, very close call but Elnora will live on now for many more years. Thank goodness to the people who made that possible. Questions?

[5:28] Question: Are there FSSA offices in other towns?

[5:32] GOV: There are.

[5:36] Question: Governor, Iowa was hit very hard last night with tornadoes and the forecast looks like the storms are going to regroup and head straight for us again. Your thoughts, your concerns heading into the weekend?

[5:50] GOV: We deserve a break. I hope they just decide to dissipate, but let's just hope that we've had all the bad luck that any state deserves in a short period of time.

[6:10] Question: In the FSSA offices, will there be FEMA people there accepting applications?

[6:16] GOV: In some cases maybe, but Mitch if you want to speak to this, the FEMA application process can be done by anybody from their home. Now there's an 800 number and there's an online opportunity, but we again want to have people who can help folks walk through that process if they are unaware of how to operate it, or might be confused. Want to say anything about that?

[6:41] Mitch Roob: Governor, thank you to FEMA, Homeland Security, and all the colleagues and the rest of the cabinet who have worked the last several days to put together a comprehensive approach to this issue. I would like to spend some time when the Governor is done and outline what those services are. We brought people today to this meeting from BMV, from insurance, etc. so if [reporters] can stick around a little bit. But the answer is we have people in those offices to help fill out those applications on FEMA. My understanding is—and Mr. Smith, you correct me if I misspeak here, please—that you have to fill out the application either on the phone or on the internet. At the FSSA offices, and at Work One offices, we have terminals available and we will have additional terminals at the three locations that the governor referenced. Those locations will be in Franklin on Monday, and the governor has asked us to get to every county with a more comprehensive approach, and we will do that as counties get turned on to the complete disaster or individual assistance is made available by the president.

[7:59] Question: But again, will there be FEMA people there to help?

[8:02] Mitch Roob: There will not be FEMA people in all locations. There will be mobile units that FEMA will provide over time and they will be coming to the places where we are, but they will not be in every one of our 29 counties all the time.

[8:16] Question: And what is the difference between these offices you're talking about and the three offices, the ones in Terre Haute, Martinsville...?

[8:23] Mitch Roob: Okay. If you go to that, those are Red Cross offices. I'll give you an example in Martinsville. In the Martinsville facility, the Red Cross has been there for a week. We will be there tomorrow. We will have a mobile BMV there, so if you've you're your driver's license—Ron, you want to come up here?—you've lost your title, Ron Stiver and his staff can get you a new one. If you have questions about your [insurance], we'll have people from the Department of Insurance there. If you have questions about your homeowners insurance or your car insurance, we'll be able to answer them there. If you need emergency food stamps at any FSSA office, you can get those emergency food stamps today and we will print you the pin number so you get your card to leave with.

[9:15] GOV: Let me see if I can summarize something here—we intend it to be a state office where you can get every question answered: federal, state, and even if it's assistance with a private matter such as insurance. FEMA is welcome in all of those offices, and we think that we'll have some of their people there as fast as they can get here. If you go to a FEMA office, all you can do is your federal assistance, but that might be the most important thing you can do. So people will have those choices. I also want to reassure people about the federal process. Secretary Roob tried one on a trial basis and he managed to do it in less than 20 minutes, and that tells me the average citizen could probably do it in ten! (Laughter)

[9:53] Question: Can you tell us about the assistance farmers will be getting? Will it prevent family farms from going under, or will some just be lost for good?

[10:08] GOV: Well clearly the intention is to prevent failures, but we've got some very serious problems out there. I'll have Andy (Miller of the State Department of Agriculture) step up to explain. There's a very wide array of possibilities here, and I would hope there's enough so that each farmer can pick up and move on, but we saw some folks who are in pretty serious trouble.

[10:33] Andy Miller, State Department of Agriculture: I would add to that—first off, we have to remember, that most farmers are homeowners so they'll qualify for a lot of the things that Secretary Roob was talking about. And then USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture) will have emergency loans. That's what the Governor sent to Secretary Schaffer earlier in the week. There

are emergency conservation programs we're going to be looking. I'll tell you what we learned today—this is a widespread challenge and most farmers don't just have one problem, they have several. And so as we get into next week and we can get a better handle on it, we can try to figure it out. But our goal is to make sure that family farm after family farm that we saw today can stand back up and get back in the business of not only their own business but giving us the production we need this year.

[11:14] GOV: We obviously know we have a lot of public infrastructure to repair or replace. We have a lot of farm infrastructure to rebuild, too. A lot of folks will not be able to get back to full operations until they've repaired their own levees or drainage facilities and so forth.

[11:34] Andy Miller: One example of that that I think was new today—well not new, but just as we saw it—just the amount of debris that's in fields. I mean that is something that we have not historically had to deal with a lot of. And now you've got people trying to get corn and beans replanted, hay made with railroad ties and in some cases propane tanks that are lying in the middle of fields. And so that's a fairly extensive challenge.

[11:59] Question: Andy, is there any estimate on the amount of agricultural fields that have been damaged?

[12:06] Andy Miller: It's too early to get an accurate number. It ranges from some farmers with 20 percent loss—we heard from some farmers today that had lost all of their acres. It's significant. We have our staff out there working on anecdotal, preliminary assessments. The official assessment rests with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Farm Service Agency that has a county office that will be out working with farmers to get the official assessment which will then trigger the secretary's ability to release emergency loans and any other assistance. And that likely will be sometime next week before those can be completed.

[12:45] Question: Do you have any guess or estimate on how many acres farmers have lost?

[12:50] Andy Miller: I really hesitate to do that just because it is so substantial. I will be shocked in those affected counties if we're not talking about 20 percent that's in some way affected very severely. But again, that's a very premature, sort of anecdotal, assessment.

[13:09] GOV: You know, we saw dozens and dozens of farmers, and I said to them, "We're not going to hold you to any of this. We're just trying to get a first cut." Because most of them don't even know on their own land—they may know that some may be completely out of commission—but there's a lot of it that might or might now produce, and there's some of it that they might be able to replant at least something on. So when they don't know about their own property, it's kind of hard for us to tell you in the aggregate. But I wanted to get started on this

today really as the first order of business after we tried to establish that people are safe and they have clean water and food and shelter.

[13:50] Question: Is there a list of the offices that people can go to?

[13:58] GOV: Yes, sure. We'll get you that list as they're added and we'll get you started today with the locations that are already in place.

[14:06] Question: Are there any additional disaster declarations made by the President?

[14:10] GOV: Not so far, but we've submitted several more and FEMA moved very quickly on the first set, and so if the flow continues at that speed we should have some more for you very soon.

[14:20] Question: What about the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture?

[14:28] Andy Miller: Again, the process there is he has agreed to act quickly and their offices are in the field as we speak. As the governor pointed out a minute ago, some of this is going to have to wait for the water to recede to get into the field and to determine the extent of the damage. That historically has taken several weeks, and they're hoping that next week we'll have a good read. But he can't do anything until that official report is done.

[14:54] Question: Can someone tell us where things stand as far as water receding?

[15:03] Joe Wainscott, Indiana Department of Homeland Security: We're still looking for the rivers to come down near Hazleton and Mount Carmel. And we have had active sand bagging operations going on at those locations.

[15:20] GOV: I'll just close with one story—I've got hundreds from the last few days, but I just couldn't help but be struck with the last conversation. At the end of our conversations down around Loogootee with a lot of farmers, a farm lady named Millie—this is somebody who has planted twice and lost them both and thinks that she's probably out of business for the rest of this year—after we'd gone through all of that I said, "Does anyone have any last questions," and she raised her hand and said, "What can we do to help other people? Where do we call to help somebody?" And I just couldn't resist telling you that because this is what I keep encountering. Here is somebody who has been hit as hard as anyone and her concern is what she can do to help someone else. You're lucky to live in a state like that.